LCA Commentaries

Participation of Works Councils

Opportunities and Risks Involved in Participation of Works Councils in the Critical Review Process Against the Background of the Current Political Debate

Sabine Schlüter

Corresponding address: Stiftung Arbeit und Umwelt (Foundation on Work and Environment), P.O. Box 3047, D-30030 Hannover, Germany; e-mail: umweltstiftung@igbce.de; Internet: http://www.arbeit-umwelt.de

1 Participation of Works Councils

A study carried out by the Institute for Ecological Research on the Economy on the topic of the "Utilisation of Environmental Balances in Decision-Making by Companies" has shown that the tool of the environmental balance is used increasingly – in particular by major companies – to detect weaknesses and to help in the long-term ecological optimisation of product manufacture.
However, the workers and their representative bodies, the works councils, have not been involved in preparing environmental balances to date.
Nevertheless, from the point of view of the Foundation on Work and Environment, such involvement would be interesting for both the workers and the companies, a feature which may be capable of contributing to improved methods and results, as seen from an environmental balance, for the following reasons:
In the context of social individualisation trends, a change in work ethics can be observed accompanied by new expectations regarding gainful employment. An important aspect of these new expectations is that of **participation orientation**. The motivation of workers diminishes with decreasing participation in the company's development.
However, this also means that the identification with the company grows with an increasing involvement in decision-making and in other processes. This also holds true for the field of **environmental protection**.

Among other things, environmental balances are used for the **detection of weaknesses**. An explicit result of an environmental balance may be a reduced risk of accidents and improved health standards for an employee's workplace, even though the initial collection of data may have been aimed at entirely different goals. However, this will only be the case where work councils whose task it is, and that have learnt, to evaluate the effects of material flows in the company on the workplaces are at least involved in the assessment of the data collected and in the subsequent discussion of options.
For the company, it is exactly this detailed knowledge possessed by the workers on the site, i.e. at the workplace, which is of utmost interest for a collection of data concerning **input/output flows**. Upon identification of **optimisation potentials**, the employees may provide vital information unavailable to external experts.
The **aspect of qualification** of employees, but ultimately also of the company as a whole, is certainly a point of equal importance to both sides. The 'new view' of operational processes achieved through the life cycle analysis within an environmental balance and the structuring of results is an important means of qualification for the employee as part of 'lifelong learning'. For the company, in turn, this may be of interest considering a view regarding the more efficient utilisation of human resources.

Together, these aspects of qualification, image improvement, and detection of weaknesses have by now become an important prerequisite for safeguarding jobs on the one hand and indirect competitive advantages on the other.

2 The Individual Steps of an Environmental Balance

The most varied expectation groups, on the one hand, and aim levels on the other, can be defined for environmental balances. Merely a rough selection follows below. However, if – dissociated from other possible expectation groups – we try to understand the worker's view, we can find examples corresponding to the individual steps of an environmental balance which should be of interest to the workers.

Upon definition of the object of the environmental balance, **fashioning the workplace** in a sustainable manner may be established as one of its goals. In this context, sustainability cannot only mean 'How do I configure workplaces so they are conducive to health?'; instead, it can also mean 'Are the ecological sustainability and safeguarding of jobs compatible objectives?'
As the analysis system is defined, important information concerning life cycle phases is collected which is essential, also beyond the limited scope of in-company work. Identification of these life cycles allows an insight into the flow of hazardous substances – often for the first time! Thus, hitherto unnoticed dangers emanating from supplied products may be detected.

The same applies to the analysis of **material and energy flows**. Here, internal experts are called for. Often, only the workers themselves have the necessary knowledge as to which aspects need to be taken into consideration in the context of the individual work processes.

What's of particular importance is the fact that the **criterion of health and safety standards** at work can be included in the selection of the applicable categories. However, this presupposes that corresponding objectives such as 'sustainable workplace design' be included in the definition of an environmental balance from the beginning.

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Ultimately, the results of an environmental balance offer the opportunity to render **in-company discussions** as well as **external discussions** more objectively. This is also important in the context of the identification with the company mentioned at the beginning.

In summary, the following concrete starting-points can be identified for the participation of workers and works councils in the critical review process:

- Assessment and evaluation of a balance depend on their objective. Criteria important from the works councils' point of view, such as the field of health and safety standards at work, must be taken into consideration even in the definition of objectives. Within the critical review process, they have the opportunity of introducing their interests in favour of the company and of the staff early on.
- Changes in the company's own production process have an impact on suppliers and customers. Involvement of works councils in the execution of environmental balances allows for a better understanding of the interdependencies and problems related to upstream and to downstream production phases, opening new opportunities for co-operation with the works councils of the companies affected.
- The collection of in-company data required for environmental balances is improved where the workers' know-how is used. Due to their practical experience, works councils are often in a better position than are others to recognise the mistakes made with 'performance criteria' or the utilisation of data sources. Their participation in the critical review process is therefore very valuable in that they contribute to ensuring validity of the environmental balance results, hence rendering the high economic effort involved in making environmental balances sensible.

3 Conclusion

What's necessary for this purpose is an appropriate qualification of the workers' representatives. The foundations for this are offered by a project promoted by the Foundation on Work and Environment and sponsored by the Federal Environmental Agency, and whose aim it is, among other things, to obtain workers' representatives as critical review experts who are involved at various levels in the environmental balance process. This could be put into effect through a solution with funds to which the companies should contribute as well.

In the opinion of the Foundation on Work and Environment, the environmental policy discussion should also focus more on the application of environmental management tools such as environmental balances and eco-audits with the participation of the workers and their representative bodies rather than on the planned extension of environmental legislation to the production phase.

The Foundation on Work and Environment has been committed to the responsible involvement of workers and their representatives in the ecological optimisation of industrial production ever since it was first established and, upon request, will be glad to offer its support.

KSLCA Corner (Korean Society for Life Cycle Assessment)[1]

Tak Hur

Corresponding address: Prof. Tak Hur, Dept. of Industrial and Engineering Chemistry, Konkuk University, 93-1 Mojin-Dong Kwangjin-Ku, Seoul 143-701, Korea; e-mail : takhur@kkucc.konkuk.ac.kr

1 Technical Journal of KSLCA

The first issue of the technical journal entitled "Life Cycle Assessment" was published in Korea last September. A total of 13 papers are included in this first issue, resulting in 110 pages overall. This issue consists of one special issue paper, four papers on LCA methodology, seven case studies, and one software review paper. Two of the papers dealing with methodology are related to Life Cycle Inventory Analysis, while the other two are on Life Cycle Impact Assessment. These papers primarily came from the academic sector, while the case studies were generally from the industry. The case studies include contributions from the steel, electronics and chemical industries.

The journal is only published once a year, reflecting the amount of work currently going on in this area in Korea. However, as the quantity of research and applications grow, the number of issues is expected to increase as well.

2 Academic Conference

The 2nd annual academic conference of KSLCA was held on November 3, 1999. There were about 200 participants from academia and industry.

The conference was a forum to present LCA case studies to the Korean LCA community, and to exchange many ideas and the progress of LCA methodology. The papers presented at the conference covered current LCA studies of both the industries and universities of Korea. The presentations were arranged into two sessions.

In **Session A**, research on LCA methodology and the developments of LCA software products were presented. Especially interesting were the presentations on methodology regarding applications of LCA in the Type III Environmental Declaration, calculation of normalization reference values pertaining to Korea, and LCI calculation methods for inner circulation systems. The software side revealed interesting developments in LCI data management and LCA programs for product designers.

In **Session B**, various LCA case studies were presented. The focus of the presentations encompassed the entire gamut of industry starting from the raw materials, energy, process and finally, the products. However, most of the papers were only able to treat the life cycle inventory phase of LCA and fell short of reaching the life cycle impact phase. Nevertheless, an life cycle impact methodology reflecting the Korean situation is currently under development and future studies should be able to cover this final aspect.

For further information about the journal and the conference, please contact:
Mr.Jong-Myung Gwak
Korean Society for Life Cycle Assessment
Dept. of Industrial & Engineering Chemistry, Konkuk University
93-1 Mojin-dong Kwangjin-ku, Seoul, Korea
Fax: +82-2-447-6710
e-mail: gwakjm@kkucc.konkuk.ac.kr

[1] Activities of the Korean Society for Life Cycle Assessment. Int. J. LCA Vol. 4, No. 5, p. 247 (1999)